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# Rossi & Wreen, eds., KANT'S PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION RECONSIDERED

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# BOOK REVIEWS

*Kant's Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered,* edited by **Philip J. Rossi** and **Michael Wreen**. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991. Pp. xxiii and 214. $25.00 (cloth).

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This book is a collection of papers, many of which were delivered at a conference at Marquette University in 1987. I will not have space to discuss all the papers in the volume. I will mention three topics: Kant's purported deism, his treatment of the atonement, and his purported communitarianism at the end of *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (henceforth cited as *R*).[1] I will start with the first paper in the volume, "Kant's Deism" by Allen Wood, because this paper sets the agenda for several of the papers which follow.[2] Wood is aware that Kant both distinguishes between deism and theism, and identifies himself as a theist in the terms of this distinction. In Kant's terms a deist, in his understanding of God, "understands merely a blindly working eternal nature as the root of all things, an original being or supreme cause of the world."[3] Kant is not in this sense a deist, because he thinks our moral faith requires belief in a God who is alive, who knows and who wills. Nonetheless Wood thinks that in the ordinary sense of "deism" Kant is a deist. Deism in this sense is "the opinion of those that acknowledge one God, without the reception of any revealed religion."[4] I want to argue that Kant is not a deist in the "ordinary" sense either.

A good text for posing the question is the opening of book 4 of *R*:

> Religion is (subjectively regarded) the recognition of all duties as divine commands. That religion in which I must know in advance that something is a divine command in order to recognize it as my duty, is the *revealed* religion (or the one standing in need of a revelation); in contrast, that religion in which I must first know that something is my duty before I can accept it as a divine injunction is the *natural* religion. He who interprets the natural religion alone as morally necessary, i.e., as a duty, can be called the *rationalist* (in matters of belief); if he denies the reality of all supernatural divine revelation he is called a *naturalist*; if he recognizes revelation, but asserts that to know and accept it as real is not a necessary requisite to religion, he could be named a *pure rationalist*; but if he holds that belief in it is necessary to universal religion, he could be named the pure *supernaturalist* in matters of faith.

Kant is, in the terms of this passage, a rationalist (and is therefore committed to denying pure supernaturalism) and not a naturalist (because naturalism just as supernaturalism transcends the limits of human insight). Given the categories Kant lists in this passage, there is therefore a strong suggestion that he wants us to conclude that he is a pure rationalist. I think he does indeed

want us to conclude this. But if Kant is a pure rationalist, then he is not a deist in the "ordinary" sense. Deism is inconsistent with "the reception of any revealed religion." The pure rationalist, on the other hand, "receives" some revelation, but holds that it is not requisite for pure religion.

Why should Kant have introduced the category of pure rationalism at all, as the alternative rationalist position to naturalism, if he did not intend us to opt in favour of this position?[5] One possibility is that Kant is tailoring his rhetoric so as to make his view sound more palatable to certain audiences than it actually is. But Kant is committed to presenting an account "with the utmost conscientiousness."[6] The constraint of sincerity falls not merely on the views he expresses, but on the form of expression. Moreover, the term "pure rationalist" is, in Kant's usual vocabulary, an honorific.[7] Within *R* this is his usual vocabulary.[8] It should be a last resort to say that "pure rationalism" is Kant's name for a position in the philosophy of religion which he cannot embrace.

Kant sees supernatural revelation as a "vehicle" in God's dealings with human beings. He argues that reason is entitled to adopt on faith a supernatural supplement to fill what is lacking in man's justification (though not to specify in what this supplement consists):

> But we need not be able to understand and state exactly what the means of this replenishment is (for in the final analysis that is transcendent and, despite all that God Himself might tell us about it, inconceivable to us); even to lay claim to this knowledge would, in fact, be presumptuous. Accordingly, scriptural texts that seem to contain such a specific revelation must be interpreted as concerning, not moral faith (for all men), but only the *vehicle* of that moral faith, designed to fit in with the creed which a certain people already held about it.

Kant goes on to say that we can consider the Christian Bible as "the *vehicle* of religion and accept it, in this respect, as supernatural revelation," because it "promotes moral precepts of reason by propagating them publicly and strengthening them within men's souls."[9]

Kant's point at the end of this passage is to deny that the supernatural revelation is necessary for religion within the limits of reason alone. He is not, that is, a pure supernaturalist. But he wants to allow the usefulness of Scripture beyond those parts of it which are necessary for eternal life (and thus already contained within reason alone).[10] There are, he thinks, historical parts of supernatural revelation which can have, for certain people and certain eras, the power of replenishment and strengthening in the moral life. This is how hope can be awakened in us "by the example of humanity as pleasing to God in His Son."[11] This additional power is not, indeed, necessary for all rational agents, and is not in that sense universal. But Kant is also of the opinion that it is necessary for many people at his own time, and this is what justifies the government's interest in biblical preaching.

Kant is thus the ancestor of such views of the Bible as those of R. B. Braithwaite and R. M. Hare, both of whom want to *deny* that they are reducing religion to morality. "A man is not," says Braithwaite "a professing Christian unless he both proposes to live according to Christian moral principles, and associates his intention with thinking of Christian stories."[12] Both of these authors acknowledge a power in the traditional stories, which may be confined to those brought up in the tradition but is none the less of great importance in helping those people live a moral life. The stories are, so to speak, the vehicle of the religion.

It would be possible to agree that historical revelation is a necessary vehicle for pure religion in primitive stages of human development, but think that it should be rejected as soon as mankind has developed beyond such tutelage. But Kant adds in the second edition of *R*, "Not that (the historical faith) is to cease (for as a vehicle it may perhaps always be useful and necessary) but that it be able to cease; whereby is indicated merely the inner stability of the pure moral faith."[13]

Braithwaite's view is in another way like Kant's. Braithwaite is an empiricist; he holds that if the Christian stories are taken as assertions of empirical fact, they lose meaningfulness. For Kant, they fail the test for knowability (but not meaningfulness). Not only the stories themselves fail this test, but any claim to have received them from God. "If God actually spoke to a human being, the latter could never know that it was God who spoke to him."[14] But it is misleading to conclude from such passages that Kant is simply an agnostic about supernatural revelation. Kant is only an agnostic about supernatural revelation in the narrow sense that he holds that the claim to have received supernatural revelation cannot be *known* to be true, in Kant's restrictive sense of "knowledge." That is, as Kant goes on to explain, "It is absolutely impossible for a human being to grasp the infinite *through the senses*" (emphasis added). It no more follows that we should not *believe* in supernatural revelation than that we should not *believe* in God. Kant is not, in the ordinary sense, an agnostic about God.

I do not see any good evidence that Kant himself did not believe in supernatural revelation, or that he did not believe in the truth of the central stories revealed in the Christian Bible. It is possible to interpret him as sceptical and silent, for prudential reasons, about his scepticism; but this is again to suppose that he is "tailoring" his rhetoric. It is true that he did not participate (for example, as Rector of the University) in religious ceremonies. But that may have been because of his dislike of the pressure towards conformity imposed by such ceremonies; they tend to make Christianity dictatorial.[15] The more a liberal finds the traditional beliefs of Christianity worthy of love, the more he will hate any attempt to enforce Christian belief at a university.

The pure rationalist accepts divine revelation but nevertheless does not

think its acceptance necessary to religion for those who have not received revelation, or those (if any) who are beyond the need for such a vehicle. This means that the pure rationalist believes it is not necessary for herself *as a rational agent* to accept revelation (even though she does accept it) in order to have religion. I think Kant's attitude is that as long as the statutes given in the Bible are consistent with practical reason, we should, if we are among those "strengthened" by the biblical stories, treat the statutes as commands of God. We will then be treating ourselves, but not treating all rational agents, as bound by them. Religion, after all, is a purely moral order only in form; "but as for the *material* aspect of religion, the sum of duties to God or the service to be rendered Him, this could contain particular duties as divine commands—duties which would not proceed merely from reason giving universal law and which would therefore be known to us only empirically, not *a priori*."[16] We should be grateful to providence as the origin of the statutes and stories which serve as the vehicle for the introduction of "the purest moral doctrine of religion in its completeness," and hence as the vehicle of an enlightenment which is not yet by any means complete.[17]

Wood is more restrained than Joseph Runzo and Denis Savage in attributing to Kant the rejection of revelation. Runzo tries to reconstruct the argument by which "Kant essentially rejects revealed theology" (p. 24). The two key premises in the argument are supposed to be (1) that there are only two types of religion: revealed religion and natural religion, (2) that it is impossible for revealed religion to provide sufficient epistemic justification for theistic truth-claims. But if, as I have claimed, Kant is a pure rationalist, he would deny the first of these premises. He would allow a third, mixed, kind of religion that believes revelation real but not necessary for all rational beings. He would accept the second premise, but only in his own narrow sense of "know" and hence of "epistemic." Savage thinks that Kant believes that miracles and divine revelation are logically possible, "but they are nevertheless materially, objectively impossible—and therefore must be completely rejected" (p. 60). But why, then, does Kant repeatedly deny that he is a naturalist, one who "denies the reality of all supernatural divine revelation"?

There is one place in Kant's system where it is most important for him to be able to appeal to a divine supplement to our practical reason. This is when he tries to explain that it is possible for us, despite our initial bondage to radical evil, to accomplish a revolution of the will by which we come into possession of a morally good disposition. Kant says that here "we can admit a work of grace as something incomprehensible, but we cannot adopt it into our maxims either for theoretical or practical use" (*R* 49/54). That is, believing in the work of grace does not change our action or our understanding (in Kant's particular sense), but we should believe in it anyway. Three essays in the volume deal with this topic. Walter Sparn usefully locates Kant's account

of the atonement against the background of the discussions amongst the "Neologians" in eighteenth-century Germany. Nicholas Wolterstorff and Leslie Mulholland offer more philosophical discussion. They agree that Kant is unsuccessful in his attempt to keep religion within the limits of reason alone, because he does not develop the resources needed to avoid an appeal outside reason for an account of the forgiveness of our sins.

Beyond this agreement, however, they disagree substantially. Wolterstorff thinks that Kant saw no problem with believing that we can become, despite our innate radical evil, well-pleasing to God through a good course of life in the future (p. 41). Wolterstorff quotes Kant's remark that a change of heart such as this must be possible, because duty requires it. Mulholland, on the other hand, shows why the possibility of such a revolution of the will must be problematic for Kant. Mulholland compares Kant to Sartre's view on the way a current project determines what can count as a motive. "How are individuals led to *want* to change their supreme maxim?," Mulholland asks; if the prevailing project is to follow the evil maxim (which subordinates duty to inclination), then "there are no motives within the prevailing project permitting this (change of heart), and the motive supplied by the moral law is the same now as it was when the original (evil) choice was made" (p. 97). Second, Wolterstorff thinks that Kant attributes to the *grace* of God what God is, on Kant's own account, morally required to give us; but then God would not be gracious, but merely meeting his obligations. Mulholland points out that God, on Kant's view, has rights but no obligations. Finally, Wolterstorff suggests that Kant contradicts himself; the Stoic maxim that "man himself must make or have made himself into whatever, in a moral sense, whether good or evil, he is or is to become" *contradicts* the claim that God wipes out guilt (p. 49). Mulholland's view here is that Kant could, though he does not, appeal to the distinction between God's determining my choice and God's liberating my choice. That is, God might remove a hindrance to my choice without determining that choice. Mulholland agrees, however, that while this might be consistent with what Wolterstorff calls the Stoic maxim, it is not consistent with a religion within the limits of reason alone.

The third topic I want to mention briefly is the attempt in papers by Sharon Anderson-Gold and Philip Rossi to explain the significance of Kant's religion for his ethics in terms of the social or collective nature of the moral life as Kant understands it. Anderson-Gold's paper makes three important points here about the contribution of *R*. First, Kant makes clear in this work that the propensity to evil takes power in us through our association with other people. We have a tendency to compare ourselves with others, which is grounded in our initial predisposition to humanity itself; "we judge ourselves happy or unhappy only by making comparisons with others" (*R* 22/27). Second, throwing off the sovereignty of evil requires, therefore, not merely individual will,

but "the forming of an alliance uniquely designed as a protection against this evil" (*R* 85/91). Third, we are unable by our own devices to form such an alliance or union. The duty to form one therefore presupposes "another idea, namely that of a higher moral Being, through whose universal dispensation the forces of separate individuals, insufficient in themselves, are united for a common end." These ideas are not worked out by Kant into a systematic account of what we might call "unitive grace"; but they are very suggestive, and give grace a more active role in our redemption than that envisaged by Wolterstorff and Mulholland.

Rossi has been working on such ideas for several years. In his paper in the present volume his purpose is to show that the notion of the highest good presented in *R* "serves as the most complete resolution that Kant gives within his critical project to the issue of the mutual relation between the exercise of human (moral) freedom and the nexus of causal relationships that constitute nature" (p. 132). I do not have space here to evaluate this project, except to say that Rossi calls for a more radical revision of Kant's earlier view of moral agency than I think is required by the text of *R*. The text does not require, I think, "an acknowledgement of the fundamental temporality of human moral agency." Anthony Perovich gives an argument in the opposite direction, that Kant comes to see that our temporal self and life will pass away, although our eternal self and its life remain.

## NOTES

1. I have cited Kant's texts with the standard English translation first, and the appropriate volume of Kant's *Gesammelte Schriften* second. The English translations I have used are as follows, in the order of citation: *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, translated by Allen Wood and Gertrude M. Clark (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978); *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, translated by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, 1960); *The Conflict of the Faculties*, translated by Mary J. Gregor (New York: Abaris Books, 1979); "What is Orientation in Thinking?" in *The Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writings in Moral Philosophy*, translated by Lewis White Beck (New York: Garland, 1976); *The Metaphysical of Morals, Part II: The Doctrine of Virtue*, translated by Mary J. Gregor (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).

2. See also Wood, "Rational Theology, Moral Faith, and Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*, edited by Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 394-416. I am very grateful to Wood for a detailed reply to a draft of this review. In criticizing the view that Kant is a deist in the ordinary sense, I am following the interpretation of some of the central texts in Michel Despland, *Kant on History and Religion* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1973).

3. *Lectures in Philosophical Theology* 81/96.

4. The phrase is quoted by Wood from John Dryden's *Religio Laici*, 1682.

5. Wood says, "But 'pure rationalism' seems scarcely deserving of its name, and it is hard to imagine anyone who would hold it. For it apparently takes the position that God

has given us certain commands supernaturally while denying that we are morally bound to carry them out. This surely cannot be a position Kant intends us to embrace. Kant's only purpose in mentioning pure rationalism at all seems to be the rhetorical one of cushioning his evident denial of pure supernaturalism."

6. *The Conflict of the Faculties* 19/10, henceforth cited as CF. See also *Critique of Pure Reason* A748-50/B776-8.

7. E.g. "What is Orientation in Thinking?" 301/142. Kant goes on to recommend pure rational belief for practical as well as theoretical reason.

8. E.g. *R* 94, and the preface to the second edition.

9. *CF* 77/44, emphasis added.

10. "(Historical belief is) its mere sensible vehicle (for certain people and certain eras), it is not an essential part of religious faith" (*CF* 63/37). *R* 102/111 and other passages like it can be read as making the point that historical faith can have its special power *only* as the vehicle of pure religious faith.

11. *CF* 75/43.

12. See R. B. Braithwaite, "An Empiricist's View of the Nature of Religious Belief," in *The Existence of God*, edited by John Hick (New York: Macmillan, 1964), p. 246. See also R. M. Hare, "The Simple Believer" in *Religion and Morality*, edited by Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr. (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1973), pp. 406ff.

13. *R* 135n/126n. At the time when the very form of the church is dissolved, this so to speak contingent necessity might cease, see *R* 126, and 112. Kant makes a similar point in *The End of All Things*, 338/82. Until that point, Christ "brings to the hearts of his fellow men their own well-understood wills."

14. *CF* 115/63.

15. *The End of All Things*, 338/82.

16. *Metaphysics of Morals: The Doctrine of Virtue*, 162/486.

17. See *R* 97/105.

*The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, by **Carolyn Franks Davis**. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. Pp. ix and 268. Cloth, $55.00.

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The recurrent interest in the epistemic value of religious experience has created a need for someone to patiently and systematically sort out the many different issues, questions, and kinds of data which might be brought to bear on the topic. Carolyn Franks Davis has done just this in *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*. The work is a presentation of her graduate research done at Oxford under Basil Mitchell and, later, Richard Swinburne. It is an excellent piece of philosophical analysis, combining careful conceptual reflection with a review of relevant material from the fields of cognitive and social psychology.